

King Solomon's Pass

By

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Now and again at a Masonic meeting of some sort, a Brother who fancies himself a wag will present another Mason with a card inscribed:

King Solomon's Pass
Permission to leave the country
(the sooner the better!)

If the recipient has not seen one of these before, a few moments of hilarity may ensue. To most Brothers, it is an old joke. Attention then turns to some other topic.

Given that the fundamental body of Freemasonry goes by the name of Symbolic Lodge, at least when we avoid the slang term "Blue" Lodge, one might wonder that hardly any attention has gone to the possibility that this "pass" is a symbol of something profound, rather than just an opportunity for a bit of humor.

The "pass" is not actually named as such in the ritual in many jurisdictions. It is a shorthand word for some form of representation of permission from King Solomon to travel, supposedly required of workmen from the Temple who might wish to leave the country. In the context of Freemasonry, this is an interesting contradiction. According to many theorists of the history of Freemasonry, the term "free" mason meant that the mason, at least one who had completed his apprenticeship, was free to travel about Europe to whatever location required his skills — and free to leave one building venue for another if he so chose. One did not have to be a master to have this privilege, in fact. In mediaeval times, this was uncommon; those who were not clerics or part of nobility were, in many

cases, bound to the land — not necessarily as serfs, but as restricted to the legal jurisdiction of a superior person, under no-longer-familiar terms like socage and villeinage. But at the building of King Solomon's Temple, the legendary free masons were not, in actuality, "free", according to our legend.

Historically, this is correct. The Temple of Solomon was built with taxes (the murder of a hated tax collector is recorded in I Kings) and forced labor (known as the corvee), just as the Israelites had been warned would occur when they first made known their desire for a king.

Although the Tabernacle in the wilderness had been built by a few skilled artisans (Aholiab and Betzal-el) and adorned by the contribution of free-will offerings (see Deuteronomy), the Temple was founded on coerced tribute (the levy) and labor (the corvee).

In Masonry, the matter comes up when certain miscreants seek escape from the trouble they are in by soliciting a sea passage from the port of Joppa to far-off Ethiopia. As Wor. Harold Grainger pointed out in a paper of his, Joppa is not an opportune port for transit to Ethiopia; it is on the wrong side of the Suez isthmus. To reach Ethiopia from Joppa would require sailing around the entirety of Africa, from the east end of the Mediterranean Sea, through the Atlantic Ocean, the Bight of Benin, around the Cape of Good Hope, passing the straits of Madagascar, and into the Red Sea beyond the Horn of Africa. In ancient times, no Sea Captain or Sea-Faring Man (see below) would attempt such a journey; indeed, it was not even known to be possible until

the voyages of the Portuguese explorers Bartolomeu Dias and Vasco da Gama in the late 15th century. Trade with Ethiopia was surely based at the location today called Eilat or Aqaba. As Wor. Bro. Grainger put it, "You can't get there from here!"

This anomaly alone should be a clue to the observant that the sea-port incident is not intended to represent something superficial but is meant to be examined for a deeper meaning. The clues may be found in the ritual itself, reinforced by a knowledge of literary tropes throughout history.

First, it is worth noting that the late distinguished Masonic writer, Rt. Wor. Bro. Duane Anderson, considered the Sea Captain and Wayfaring Man (in some jurisdictions, combined as a single character, a Sea-faring Man) to be the most important characters in the Degree. The Sea Captain refuses a bribe to betray his trust, turning away three lucrative fares, thereby teaching the lesson of fidelity, notwithstanding that the long journey he is about to make will put him far beyond any possible punishment for disobeying the King. According to Bro. Anderson, the Wayfaring Man illustrates that there may be something to learn from even the meanest member of society (and the Wayfaring Man is often costumed in the scruffiest, most disreputable manner).

The common symbol found in the encounter at Joppa is that of the sea voyage. The sea, until the 20th century, was a place of fascination and mystery, and often, of loss. The theme of the family member who "went to sea, and was never heard of again" occurs often in Western literature. Related themes occur in Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe", which appeared in print just after the organization of the Premier Grand Lodge in England, Tennyson's poem, "Enoch Arden," and many others; real-life conundrums, like the "Marie Celeste", add to the sea's mystique. Only the invention of radio made it

possible to know what was going on with a ship between embarkation and arrival.

From antiquity, the journey by water has been particularly an allegory for death. In Greek mythology, when the souls of the dead reached the underworld, they were required to cross the River Styx by ferry, operated by the boatman Charon. It was then customary for the dead to be buried with coins to pay for the ferry passage, lest they be stranded in the darkness for eternity. (Four other rivers surrounded the underworld, domain of Hades: Acheron, Cocytus, Phlegethon, and Lethe.)

Although ancient Israel had a substantial seacoast, there is almost no mention of seafaring in the Jewish Scriptures, with the exception of the voyage of Jonah fleeing to Tarshish, where the fears of the sailors (who are, from the story, clearly not Israelites) of dying in the storm at sea are vividly depicted. (The Phoenicians, on the other hand, were noted for their sea-faring prowess; as the three miscreants are sometimes identified as men of Tyre, resort to an ocean passage might well have been their first resort for escape.) Jonah, of course, as the story relates, prefers death to being seen as a false prophet.

In our own ritual, we learn in the lecture of the 3rd degree about the monitorial emblem of the Anchor and Ark. These two are explicitly associated with the end of earthly life in their description, where the Ark carries us to the next world, secured there by the Anchor. The Anchor has long symbolized hope (slides illustrating the EA lecture show a personified Hope bearing an anchor, and the anchor is depicted on the Rhode Island state flag with the motto "Hope"), which is meant, in this emblem, to assuage our fears of what lies on the other side of the "sea of troubles" navigated by the Ark.

With that meaning established, the question becomes why, beyond the association of Tyre with sea-faring already mentioned, would the three characters of our drama attempt to escape

by sea voyage. We learn from the rest of the legend that discovery, apprehension, and punishment for their misdeeds is not only certain but also dire. That point is also made by one of the Third Degree's monitorial emblems, which teaches that justice will surely overtake us all.

It is not surprising that evil-doers would seek to escape condign retribution for their misdeeds by flight; our newspapers and movies are full of car chases to bear witness to this. But by sea — one of the slowest (and most dangerous, in those times) forms of travel? The ship bound for Ethiopia would have had to put in for provisions as it sailed westward, and messengers from King Solomon, a well-respected ruler in the region, could have overtaken it and apprehended the criminals.

The one escape that has always put recreants beyond the reach of earthly justice is suicide. The association of the water voyage with death and loss in all eras tells us that this is the symbolic meaning of the request for passage by sea. Some sages would say that the greater sin of suicide in this case is that of fearing man's justice more than that of the Deity.

And that is the meaning of King Solomon's Pass — or rather that of not having such a pass: That the Supreme Architect does not permit or sanction such an escape from the justice of men before facing His infinite judgment. Remember that Jonah sought an escape by sea and was even tossed overboard (at his own request) to save the sailors from perishing — yet God decreed that it was not his time, preparing a fish to swallow Jonah and convey him to dry land to complete his prophetic mission, reaching Nineveh safely and even speaking his prophecy without being put to death as an enemy outlander. Thus it was not allowed for the three workmen from the Temple to escape the justice of King Solomon, that an example might be set for future ages.

No, the little card giving King Solomon's Pass to another is not a very good joke. Think well on the

symbolism of our degrees before giving a Brother permission to drop dead!

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